COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Chart maker great fun for work

For evaluating sales figures, costs or other business data, nothing is better than a graph or a chart. You can now produce them — fast — without engaging a commercial artist or fiddling around with pens, rulers and markers through a wonderful program called Graph-In-The-Box.

Designed for use with IBM PCs and PC-compatible computers, the $99.95 program from New England Software Inc. of Greenwich, Conn., is simple and slick, and has the marvelous capability of picking up data you've already entered in other programs and using it within the chart or graph being produced.

Here's how it works:

✔ No matter what program you're using, just touch the Alt and G keys simultaneously and Graph-In-The-Box pops on the screen. By setting it up just once in the Auto-exec.Bat file on your hard disk, it will be loaded automatically every time you log on your computer. It's memory resident, so it will be available all the time.

✔ You're instructed to move the cursor to the beginning of the data set you wish to graph and hit the enter key. And then move the cursor to the end of the data set that you wish to graph and hit the enter key again. Instantly the data is now moved into the Graph-In-The-Box program and it's ready for manipulation.

✔ Next, select one of 11 types of graphs or charts to show the data. Your choices include column charts, stacked column charts, bar charts, line charts, line charts with filled area, scatter charts, mixed charts and pie charts. Then you enter titles and column headings as desired.

✔ The result is shown instantly on the screen. If you have a color monitor, you'll even get different colors for each data type. The final step, however — which I found to be the most fun — is to go back and play with the options. By trying different types of charts, you'll probably discover one that best conveys the meaning of the data you are representing.

The beauty of the program is that you don't have to retype data or titles in order to play around. Just two or three keystrokes to redefine the type of chart and it instantly appears in the new format. If you don't like it or want to try another, just a few more keystrokes and you can have it another way.

In short, it allows your creative juices to flow, unhindered by many technical details.

Part of the reason for Graph-In-The-Box's extreme ease-of-use is that it uses cursor-movement and other conventions similar to many other programs. As a result, you don't have to refer very often to the manual. In fact, as an experiment, I tried to see how far I could go without looking at the manual.

My first graph was about 50 percent done before I gave up and referred to the documentation.

The final chart or graph can be saved to a file for future reference or printed. Unless you have a color printer, however, it'll be better to view it on the screen.

Graph-In-The-Box compares well with the many presentation programs that include graphing features. Typically, many others are much more complicated. Some have data-importing features, but unless you use them every day you'll spend more time learning how to make them operate than it would take to re-input the data.

The bottom line: It's addictive! Even if you suspect that you'll use Graph-In-The-Box only occasionally, you'll be surprised to discover yourself using it frequently.

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